

Transit Needs Summary

STUDY PURPOSE

The Montana Statewide Rural Passenger Needs Study was completed to gather baseline transit data across the State of Montana and to determine the transit need for the state. The transit needs analysis provided information on what and where the needs are for transit services. These data can be used to determine the best use of the state's transit dollars. Not knowing the extent of the unmet need meant that Montana Department of Transportation was unable to determine the effectiveness of the existing transit system. Lack of an adequate database also meant that resource allocation was based on historical past practice rather than meeting a specified level of need.

This transit needs study provides an assessment of how public and nonprofit transit services meet the needs of the residents and visitors of Montana. This study provides guidance to develop an integrated, multimodal system of transportation services. The analysis within this report explains the existing transit demand and indicates areas that may be candidates for service adjustments or improvements.

UNMET TRANSIT NEEDS

Unmet transit needs are currently defined in terms of a target group of people, specifically, people who are recognized as "transportation disadvantaged." An individual is considered "transportation disadvantaged" when his or her transportation needs are not adequately met by the automobile. As stated in this report, the State of Montana is meeting 17 percent of its need with the existing public and nonprofit transit services. This equates to over 3,118,000 annual one-way trips across the state. It is important to note that although every effort was made to quantify the level of existing transit service, not all services were included in this study. Those outside the scope of the study include taxis, family members, carpools, and other informal providers.



The data within this report provide a snapshot in time, and the future usefulness of the information depends on continued updates and analysis. This project should be seen as a starting point, which provides direction for the future rather than the end of a project.

The 83 percent of unmet transit need across the state provides an opportunity for the state, local, and regional planners to improve transit services. This may include many different types of public, nonprofit, and private services such as taxi subsidies, community transportation (ride services provided by volunteers and public service agencies), demand-response, ridematching (car- and van-pools), small buses, full-size buses, express commuter buses, and various types of rail. Transit improvements could consist of increased vehicle speeds, service frequency, rider convenience and comfort, better information, fare discounts, better integration with other modes, and consumer marketing that increases awareness and rider prestige. Transit improvements could also represent land use patterns, pedestrian and cycling conditions (since these are common access modes), intercity travel options, carsharing services (which provide mobility from transit stations), and personal security.

IMPORTANCE OF TRANSIT

By some measures, public transit is a minor transport mode. It provides less than two percent of total personal vehicle travel in the United States, a portion that has decreased with growing automobile ownership and declining transit service. About 90 percent of households own an automobile, and most Americans seldom or never ride transit.



But from other perspectives, public transit is important. Recent studies at the Victoria Transport Policy Institute report approximately 12 percent of US residents used public transit at least once during the last two months, and transit use increases considerably among certain groups: non-drivers, low-income, and

urban residents. A significant portion of the population will rely on public transit at some point during their lives:

- As a teenager, prior to obtaining a driver's license and an automobile.
- As a college student or beginning employee with a limited income.
- During a temporary period of physical disability or low income.
- If they move to or work in a transit-oriented city.
- As an older person who cannot drive.

STATEWIDE TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

One of the challenges that will continue to face Montana planners is the incorporation of transit as a transportation mode into planning processes. Without recognizing transit as a feasible transportation mode, additional funding will continue to be a struggle for transit agencies. This report has identified future levels of funding for different transit service scenarios. The available funding may not be enough to maintain even existing services, let alone the increasing needs around the state.

COORDINATION EFFORTS

As governmental resources remain unstable and transit agencies and social service providers continue to experience increasing demands, there is a need to implement more cost-effective transportation solutions in local communities. These cost-effective solutions also supply additional transportation options and may assist in supplying transportation for the unmet transit needs within a community. Coordination of transportation services is a concept that has improved services in many areas in recent years. However, the terms coordination and/or consolidation are often threatening to many agencies that provide some form of transportation. There is sometimes apprehension that the agency will lose control of their operations or that employees will lose their jobs. Therefore, a general discussion of transportation service coordination is provided as background for the development of this alternative.

Coordination has been interpreted as everything from telephone conversations to transfer of vehicle ownership. There are four different phases or levels of coordination with regard to the shared use and efficient operation of equipment and facilities. These levels are defined below:



- **Communication** involves recognition and understanding of a problem and discussion of possible solutions. This improves the working relationships among various bodies who are in a position to influence transportation developments within their particular jurisdiction.
- **Cooperation** involves the active working together of individuals in some loose association in a cooperative way. The individuals or individual agencies retain their separate identities.
- **Coordination** involves bringing together independent agencies to act together in a concerted way, in order to provide for a smooth interaction of separate units of a transportation system. In coordination, the primary concern is in the form of common funds, equipment, facilities, or operations. Members or agencies preserve their separate identities.
- **Consolidation** involves joining together or merging agencies for mutual advantage. In the case of transportation services and in the context of this report, consolidation is used in reference to a fully integrated transportation system in which all individual units have been combined or consolidated into one integrated system. Individual agency identity for the purpose of transportation is no longer maintained.

Many transportation operators have found coordination to be desirable and beneficial. Coordination has resulted in a reduction in overlap and duplication of service, more service capacity, greater productivity and operating efficiency, and reduction in capital and operating costs.

Specific barriers may exist with the coordination of transit services. However, these barriers vary with each community and are often not a problem if the entities are willing to work together. Some of the coordination barriers include regulations, funding, insurance, and institutional structures. Frequently these barriers are overcome because of the desire by local transportation providers to coordinate their efforts. However, if coordination is not desired, the barriers are easily used as reasons to avoid coordination efforts.

Many different types of organizations across the state provide transportation services. Each of these organizations functions independently. Human services transportation is not viewed as a community-wide service, but rather as a client or program-specific service. Services are generally segmented into senior transportation services, Medicaid services, school pupil transportation, or Head Start service. In rural areas, public transit is typically perceived as special group transportation. While some of the existing transit services in Montana are



coordinated, many are not. It is recommended by the LSC Team that coordination continue to be supported by MDT. Further study is needed for area-specific coordination recommendations. Below is a generic approach for MDT to advocate for transportation coordination.

Overall Approach – Goal of Improved Coordination

Goal #1: To serve more people and serve them better

- ▶ Better mobility and access
- ▶ More options in service types, days, and hours
- ▶ Cost effective

Goal #2: To make the best use of available resources

- ▶ Sharing equipment and other physical resources
- ▶ Sharing mental resources (training, planning, etc.)
- ▶ Joint procurement of resources

Goal #3: To more effectively respond to unfounded state and federal mandates

- ▶ ADA, drug/alcohol testing, Medicaid mandates
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Due to the complexity of improving transportation coordination, overall principles are listed below to help focus the effort.

- **State and Local Partnerships** – In order for coordination to be successful, partnerships between state and local entities will be required. An attitude of common purpose must prevail as neither state nor local entities can be fully successful without support of the other. Developing and maintaining these partnerships will be a major challenge at both levels.
- **Education and Incentives** – A strategy should be developed which emphasizes education and incentives to coordination. The benefits of coordination should be demonstrated to state and local entities and incentives to coordination offered. Mandates should not be ignored, but they should not be the emphasis of a statewide transportation coordination effort. To an increasing extent, decisions to coordinate should be made by state agencies and local providers as a matter of choice, rather than in response to state or federal directives.
- **State Leadership and Support** – While education should be emphasized rather than administrative or legislative mandates, state agencies must be aggressive in encouraging coordination. Effective leadership will be necessary to produce change. Leadership could take form of active par-



ticipation of reviewing existing agency policies and procedures which inhibit coordination, and aggressively working with local entities to implement coordination options which have merit.

- **Local Decision-Making and Flexibility** – While the focus of this study has been on statewide and county transit needs, the key end product of coordination will be improved service at the local level. This goal must be kept in mind as coordination efforts are implemented. There are a variety of state and federal funding programs and local circumstances and conditions in Montana. It will be crucial to build flexibility into the coordination effort. A variety of local community responses should be incorporated, rather than a “one size fits all” approach.
- **Service Quality** – Transportation service quality is a key issue which must be addressed in any coordination effort. Prior to entering into coordination agreements, local agencies need to know that quality services will be provided for their clients.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This discussion of the challenges facing the state and the findings of this study lead to several recommendations. MDT will review these recommendations and implement those that will help achieve the Department’s mission.

- The MDT Transit Section should continue to be responsible for maintenance of the public transit database.
- Identify innovative and non-traditional funding sources to meet future transit needs throughout the state.
- Provide assistance to counties and regions in prioritizing competing funding needs among various transportation modes. Provide for universal accessibility in the planning process.
- Develop a balanced multimodal transportation system for a reasonable, viable mix of automobile and mass transit.
- Coordination among the existing services will help meet some of the unmet need across the state.
- Change public attitudes toward mass transit through marketing, public information systems, and highly efficient and effective operations.
- Publicize the statewide needs for public transportation and the financial resources, which are required to meet those needs. Update the study every five years.

